

ATTACHMENT

by *Ajahn Brahmavamso*

NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMASAMBUDHASSA

Probably the most misunderstood term in Western Buddhist circles is that usually translated as 'attachment'. Too many have got it into their head that they shouldn't be attached to anything. Thus jokes abound such as the one on why the houses of Buddhists have dirt in the corners - because they don't allow even their vacuum cleaner any attachments. Some misguided pseudo-Buddhists criticise those living a moral life as being attached to their precepts and thus praise immoral action as a sign of deep wisdom. Bah! Others in traditional Buddhist circles create fear of deep meditation by incorrectly stating that you will only get attached to the *Jhanas*. It all goes too far. Perhaps the pinnacle of mischievous misinformation was said by Rajneesh who claimed "I am so detached, I am not even attached to detachment" and thus conveniently excused all his excesses.

The *Pali* work in question is *UPADANA*, literally meaning 'a taking up'. It is commonly used indicating a 'fuel', which sustains a process, such as the oil in a lamp being the fuel/upadana for the flame. It is related to craving (*TANHA*). For example, craving is reaching out for the delicious cup of coffee, *Upadana* is picking it up. Even though you think that you can easily put the cup of coffee down again, though your hand is not superglued to the cup, it is still *Upadana*. You have picked it up. You have grasped.

Fortunately not all *Upadana* is un-Buddhist. The Lord Buddha only specified four groups of *Upadana*: 'taking up' the five senses, 'taking up' wrong views, 'taking up' the idea that liberation may be attained simply through rites and initiations, and 'taking up' the view of a self. There are many other things that one may 'take up' or grasp, but the point is that only these four groups lead to rebirth, only these four are fuel for future existence and further suffering, only these four are to be avoided.

Thus taking up the practice of compassion, taking up the practice of the Five Precepts or the greater precepts of a monk or nun, and taking up the practice of meditation - these are not un-Buddhist and it is mischievous to discourage them by calling them 'attachments'. Keeping the Five Precepts is, in fact, a letting go of coarse desires like lust, greed and violence. Practising compassion is a letting go of self-centredness and practising meditation is letting go of past, future, thinking and much else. The achievement of *Jhana* is no more than the letting go of the world of the five senses to gain access to the mind. *Nibbana* is the letting go once and for all of greed, hatred and delusion, the seeds of rebirth. *Parinibbana* is the final letting go of body and mind (the Five *Khandhas*). It is wrong to suggest that any of these stages of letting go are the same as attachment.

The path is like a ladder. One grasps the rung above and lets go of the rung below to pull oneself up. Soon, the rung just grasped is the rung one is now standing on. Now is the time to let go of that rung as one grasps an even higher rung to raise oneself further. If one never grasped anything, one would remain spiritually stupid.

To those without wisdom, letting go may often appear as attachment. For example a bird on the branch of a tree at night appears to be attaching firmly to the branch, but it has actually let go and is fully asleep. When a bird lets go and the muscles around its claws begin to relax they close on the branch. The more it relaxes, the more the claws tighten. That's why you never see a bird fall off a perch even when they are asleep. It may look like attachment but, in fact, it is letting go. Letting go often leads to stillness, not moving from where you are, which is why it is sometimes mistaken as attachment.

So don't be put off by well-meaning but misinformed L-plate Buddhists who have completely misunderstood *Upadana* and attachment. Attach without fear to your precepts, your meditation object and to the path for it will lead to *Nibbana*. And don't forget to purchase the attachments for your vacuum cleaner too!

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